

Lister Sinclair

Good evening, and welcome to Ideas. I'm Lister Sinclair with Part 5 of The Education Debates, our continuing look at the competing claims that divide opinion on this crucial subject. Tonight, series author David Cayley turns his attention to the mother of all education debates, the controversy about whether reading should be taught by phonics or by the Whole Language method. He'll look into the arguments for both positions in the first part of the program and then introduce you to Montreal poet and essayist David Solway. Solway is the author of 'Education Loss' and 'Lying about the Wolf', two recent books of essays about the damaged literacy of today's students and the difficulties of educating them.

The Education Debates, Part 5, by David Cayley.

David Cayley

In the fall of 1995, the legislature of the state of California enacted unanimously what became known as the ABC Law. It instructed the state board of education, amongst other things, to see to it that schools employ what the bill called "systematic explicit phonics" in the teaching of reading. By the following year, the legislature had passed six more reading bills authorizing altogether nearly a billion dollars to teach phonics, to train teachers and reduce class sizes in the early grades. Other states have now passed or are considering similar laws. The involvement of legislatures in the detail of the elementary school curriculum is an indication of just how inflamed and how vexing an issue reading instruction has recently become. What is at stake, to put it most simply, is whether reading is a matter of decoding sound-letter correspondences, the phonics thesis, or of recognizing and remembering whole words, which is called the Whole Language or word approach. I'll examine both, beginning with phonics.

Phonemic awareness, along with the ability to blend sounds, are two of the main elements of what California's ABC Law called "systematic phonics". If all children were patiently and

Carl Bereiter is one of the authors of a beginning reading phonics program called 'The Open Court Collections for Young Scholars' and he's a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. He's been involved in educational research for more than 30 years and he says that during that time a lot has been discovered about reading. For example, when he began to teach reading to pre-schoolers back in the 1960s, he says, he was aware of only one of the two main obstacles he now thinks confront beginning readers.

Carl Bereiter

Putting sounds together to make words is a big hurdle. It's not enough to teach kids that C-A-T can be sounded out as cuh-aa-t, because even if you get the kid to say it very fast, cuh-aa-t, it still doesn't come out as cat. That leap from the sounds to the word is a big leap. We knew that. And we worked hard at developing ways to get kids over that hurdle and it can be done. The part we didn't realize, though, is that it's also very important, before that, to get so that you can hear words as composed of identifiable sounds. There are 44 phonings in English and a part of our problem is that we only have 26 letters and so on. But what does it mean to say there are 44 sounds? If you look at it spectrographically, there ... almost unlimited number of sounds in ordinary spoken English. That hearing words in a way so that you can recognize, oh, the same sound is appearing in this word, this word and this word and it's different from this other sound that's in this word, is a big, big leap and that's ... goes by the name of phonemic awareness now. It starts ahead of teaching phonics and then merges into it.

David Cayley

carefully taught these abilities in Kindergarten and Grade I, proponents of this teaching say, the current epidemic of reading problems would largely disappear and so would many

supposed learning disabilities. Opposing this view is the Whole Language approach. Its main tenets are that readers see words, not letters, that they predict the meaning of words from their context, rather than by sounding them out, that readers learn to read by reading, just as one learns to talk by talking and not by being taught how to make the vocal chords vibrate, and finally, that there is considerable natural variation in the age at which children are ready to read and forcing the issue will only produce aversion in the learner. Debates between these approaches can be traced all the way back to the 19th century, but the current round dates from the 1970s and 1980s, when Whole Language was adopted in many schools. By the 80s, according to education writer Andrew Nikiforak, it had become the chief form of reading instruction in England, New Zealand, the United States and Canada. Deborah Howes has written for *Saturday Night* and the *Globe and Mail* on the reading issue and is now trying to arrange publication of a book on the subject called, dramatically, 'The Lost Generation'. She's also a parent whose son had reading problems before she taught him phonics. She says that, with the emergence of Whole Language, phonics programs were scrapped in many Canadian schools.

Deborah Howes

In the late seventies, early eighties, the educators decided they did not need these programs any more and they literally trashed them. One of the programs in Canada was Language Patterns. It was a beginning reading phonics program used very successfully. They literally trashed it, threw it in garbage bins. I spoke to teachers in Etobicoke who said they literally pulled it out of garbage bins so they could continue using the program. They also shipped it to Third World countries. They shipped the program to Kenya and Trinidad. In fact, you could go into--and this is what I've done in my research--you can go into a Grade II classroom and listen to a child from Trinidad, who's just

immigrated, reading fluently and it's because they have Language Patterns in Trinidad, which they're still using now.

David Cayley

The result of the abandonment of programs like Language Patterns, in Deborah Howes' opinion, has produced poor, insecure readers who are often reduced to guessing at words. She recalls one such Grade II student whom she tested in Hamilton.

Deborah Howes

One little boy, I showed him the word 'puppy' and he said ... I pointed to it and he said ... I said, "What's that word? Can you read that word?" and he said, well, that's ... he looked at me and he went "Happy birthday?" And is aid to him, I said, "Why do you think that that word says happy birthday? There's only one word there." And he said ... he pointed to the two Ps in the word puppy and he said, "Because of those two shapes, those two Ps." Now, this is what you get, usually. You get these kids that end up in Grade II and III and they can't read a word. They're just clued right out. And then you get the other ones. They're beautiful, brilliant memorizers. So they look like they're reading but they're really not. They've got a lot of gaps. Some kids can to right up 'til Grade VI before it really starts to ... that he really starts to notice, hoo, boy, something's wrong here and then they're usually the kids, too, that have problems with multi-syllable words. When they get their science texts or different texts with more complicated words, they're just stumped 'cause their brains haven't learned to automatically to code words and syllables. And then you've got the other ones that ... that have been tutored at home or they ... there are 20, probably 20-25% of kids that do pick up the code. But they still have to go through that process. But they ... they're the lucky ones.

David Cayley

The feeling that only a lucky few will learn to read on their own has led phonics supporters to put strong pressure on schools and school boards to readopt phonics programs. They cite a substantial body of research which, they say, definitively proves the superiority of phonics. Recently widely reported research done in Houston, for example, showed that Grade 1 kids taught phonics could read more words after a year than kids in Whole Language classrooms. Some schools and boards have returned to phonics, but Deborah Howse says that there continues to be strong resistance to this method amongst education officials. The problem, she believes, is that a lot of teachers, administrators and publishers have invested their resources and their reputations in Whole Language and it's hard for them to change.

Deborah Howse

It's almost like a gridlock because you have these programs and you have these people that start to devote their career to this new way of teaching reading and, before you know it, it's hard to change. I mean, you could say, well, these publishers could still make money on beginning reading programs. Every school, all schools need a beginning reading program, so what's the problem? Just switch over. Well, I mean, they wouldn't have the market and the reason they don't have the market is because you get careers locked up in this new approach. I mean, somebody's made it up to the top of ... the superintendent of the school, whatever, and they've ... and they... what, are they going to turn around and say, oh boy, did I make a mistake. Sorry, kids.

David Cayley

A few have said Sorry, kids. Bill Honig, who headed California's school system in the 1980s, renounced his support for Whole Language and became one of the leaders in the resurgence of phonics. But his case is not typical. Carl Bereiter thinks that part of the problem has been the prevalence of ideological thinking in the field of education.

Again and again, he says, pragmatic approaches to educational problems have been undermined by a mania for the total solution.

Carl Bereiter

What's prevailed and what's still prevailing in Ontario is an ideologically driven Whole Language approach in which there's an effort to have one dominant philosophy that guides everything. So if what you eventually want is people to enjoy and appreciate literature and to get deeply into the books they're reading--which we all do want--then you can't start out by teaching them the sounds that go with letters. 'Cause it doesn't fit. It doesn't fit the scheme. There's very good work being done in ... in mathematics education where kids are essentially reconstructing mathematics. And insisting that it make sense and really building, in their own minds, a structure of mathematics that they can work with very flexibly. I've talked to people who are working very effectively in that area, and they get terribly distressed if they go into a classroom with one of the teachers they're working with and find that the teacher starts off the day with a mental arithmetic drill. Because, again, it doesn't fit the theory of ... which they call Constructivism. It doesn't fit the ideology. But the teacher in this case is sensing something that they don't, which is that there's more than one part to mathematical competence. And you can approach one part of it one way and another part another. You know, sports coaches and trainers, they all know this. They can take a very spiritual approach towards some aspects of the sport they're trying to teach and in others it's just straight exercise. And in others it's learning of strategy. You know, they're just ... it's multi-faceted--all of human skills are. And it seems to be only in the education system that people leave all that common sense behind and feel they've got to have a theory.

David Cayley

The Whole Language philosophy, to which I now turn, has been inspired in part by the writings of Frank Smith. Smith is a former newspaper man who became an academic in pursuit of an interest in language and learning.

He has taught at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and at the University of Victoria. His book, 'Understanding Reading', is now in its fifth edition; 'Reading Without Nonsense' in its third. These books and others have certainly influenced teachers, but Smith disclaims any authority, either as the inventor of a method or as the leader of a campaign. Whole Language, he says, is, above all, a teachers' movement.

Frank Smith

The conflict between Whole Language people and phonics people is a conflict between teachers and experts. Whole Language didn't come from experts. I'm not responsible for Whole Language. Whole Language didn't come out of a university department. Whole Language arose among teachers and has spread through teachers and developed through teachers and has been transformed all over the world through teachers. It's a teachers' movement that basically says we need to have some respect in schools. We need respect for language. We shouldn't be delivering these stupid little exercises and tests and things with blank spaces in them and mixed up words. We should be using real language the way people really talk, the way people really write books, the way people really enjoy reading books. We need more respect for children. We shouldn't treat them like battery hens. We shouldn't just throw out these little crumbs, a little bit at a time, and say this is what you're supposed to be doing. And we need more respect for teachers. We need to recognize that teachers know more than anyone else, because they know their students. And against the teachers are these people outside the classroom who say we know better than you do, we know exactly what kids should learn and we not only know how

they should learn it but we know in which sequence they should learn it and what little bits and how, in fact, you should control their learning. And we will tell you exactly how to do it. And it's gone so far that recently the phonics people, in order to assert their point of view against individual teachers who still rebel against it, is that they've taken the route of litigation. They're passing legislation in the federal government of the United States and in a number of the state governments to force teachers to use their phonics material.

David Cayley

Reading and writing, Frank Smith has said, should come as effortlessly as the understanding and mastery of speech. In a literate society, writing is an obvious and interesting part of the environment, from books to billboards. Under these circumstances, he contends, children, as part of their powerful overall drive to make sense of their surroundings, will naturally strive for competence in reading. In his view, this ought to require little special instruction. Children will learn to make sense of print, just as they acquire other desirable abilities, by determined practice.

Frank Smith

The argument of a number of people who see the world the way I do is that there's only one way to learn to read and that's by reading. Just as you learn to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle. And, of course, you say, okay, how do you learn to read by reading before you can read and the answer is somebody has to read to you, which is why this business of parents reading to children and teachers reading to the classroom are so important. It's not just a frill, it's the core of doing it. But children can learn to read so fast if the circumstances are propitious that ... we've all seen it. Kids tuck themselves away in a corner and get out a copy of The Odyssey or something like this and sit down and slug their way through it. Not because they want to learn to read, but

because they want to enjoy the story.

We learn to read, according to Frank Smith, by pursuing the purposes reading serves for us and not by being trained in the mechanics of reading. But purposes cannot be given or trained in the same way as skills. It follows that when reading is allowed to wait on the maturation of a child's purpose in reading, there will be considerable variation in the age at which children pick it up. This is one reason why Whole Language is at a disadvantage, vis a vis phonics, in standard tests. Another, Smith says, is that the tests alleged to show the superiority of phonics are often tests of phonics rather than a real reading.

Frank Smith

These are never pure tests. You can't, in fact, study whether phonics instruction makes somebody into a reader because you don't know that they wouldn't have become a reader if they hadn't had the phonics instruction. Most of the tests of phonics instruction are, in fact, tests of how well a child eventually can perform phonics-type activities. So they'll teach phonics for six months. At the end of that time they'll give a child a list of words and say can you read those words. Now, only a child who's studied phonics can do that because a kid who is trying to learn to read through making sense of a text can't make sense of a list of a dozen words.

David Cayley

The ability to make sense of text can actually be undermined by phonics training, in Frank Smith's opinion. Phonics, he says, makes jerky, mechanical readers.

Frank Smith

The worst readers are the ones who try to decode words phonically. Words ... and you just can't, in fact, decide what a word ... the only kids who can demonstrate any fluency in phonics, you know, putting together the sounds to identify a particular words ... a particular

David Cayley

word are the kids who know the word in the first place. Once you know what the word is, then, in fact, it's easy to show your facility with the phonics. It's much like spelling. Often the phonics approach is combined with spelling and saying, you know, we need to teach phonics so that children understand the sounds of words so they can become good spellers. The worst spellers are phonic spellers, phonetic spellers. You've got to get far beyond that if you're going to learn how to spell words.

David Cayley

Well, that's true.

Frank Smith

Yeah.

David Cayley

You can't spell English words phonetically in many, many cases.

Frank Smith

In the majority of cases. I mean, it's guaranteed that you're going to be wrong three times out of four if you try to spell a word using phonics rules. Which means that it's guaranteed that three times out of four you're going to be wrong if you try to decode a word using phonics rules. Okay, you want the final argument about phonics?

David Cayley

Yes.

Frank Smith

Computers can't do it. All of these computer programs where the computer is supposed to be able to read because it looks at text and then speaks aloud what the text is is based on whole word recognition, not on letter recognition. You can put all of the rules into phonics in to a computer but they can't use it to identify individual words in text because there are too many exceptions, because the whole

system of phonics is so unreliable.

The unreliability of phonics is a key part of Smith's paradoxical argument that you can only decode a word phonetically once you already know what it is. Carl Bereiter acknowledged earlier that when spoken English is analysed by a spectrograph it appears to be composed of a nearly unlimited variety of sounds. However, Bereiter believes that through the practice of phonemic awareness we can learn to recognize the 45 phonemes to which every English word can be reduced and that we can then learn to associate these with the more or less regular spelling patterns by which they are represented. Frank Smith does not believe this. He admits that the phonetic resemblance between spoken words and their written representation may help us to remember them, but he does not think that we learn these words in the first place by turning their letters into sounds. Finally, Smith denies that the Whole Language philosophy has produced any increase in reading problems. (Unclear) claims either way are dubious, he says, but a claim of declining literacy certainly can't be sustained.

Frank Smith

If you want to argue the other way, that literacy has increased, it's very easy to do that, if one is selective about the test results in the national assessments in Britain and Canada and the United States, to find that, in fact, people are reading better than ever. More Frank Smith's view of reading differs from the phonics position in two crucial respects. First, there's a difference on a matter of fact, which is what people physiologically do when they read. And then there's also a philosophical difference out of which grow radically different assumptions. The phonics case assumes that children ought to make steady progress along a graded curriculum and this expectation of punctual results makes falling behind a very real danger. Whole Language assumes a free, ungraded environment in which abilities

David Cayley

people are going to school; more people are going to university. Publishers are selling more books. Newspapers are selling more copies of their newspapers. It's actually very hard to find an illiterate person. But most people can read and write in the particular occupation they're in or in the particular area of interest that they have. It's very dubious to say that there's been any decline in reading ability in education. But even if there has been, by far the greater part of the instruction for the last 100 years has been phonics. Even during the heyday of the Whole Language revolution, children were still getting phonics. They were still being tested on phonics. You can't find a school where phonics isn't used. A teacher's only got to see a child struggling with ... to use a bit of phonics. No Whole Language person has ever said that you shouldn't help kids when it's useful to them to recognize, you know, how a written word sounds out. The objection, as far as I can see, of the Whole Language people is for kids to be taught phonics systematically before they become readers, not allowing them to become a reader until, in fact, they have mastered all of these phonics drills which, in fact, are meaningless until you're a reader. Once you can read, you have no problem with phonics, which is why so many people think phonics must work because it looks obvious, once you can read.

David Cayley

will appear in imitation of admired models or in pursuit of desired purposes, both of which are chances that cannot be guaranteed or precisely timed. These assumptions are so different that it's hard to see how the two approaches can fairly be compared. What can be said, I think, is that whole language is an approach that cannot be applied in schools without first revolutionizing the school as well as re-educating the parents. In my experience, children outside of school settings may learn to read as early as four or as late as

ten, when the timing is left up to them. And if this is what the parents and the children expect, then there's no problem. In schools, this kind of variation is rarely tolerable and I think this is where most of the trouble has come from. I don't think the disagreement between the two approaches can be definitively settled but recognizing the assumptions each approach makes and the conditions each requires to work might at least clarify the debate.

David Cayley

Whoever is right in the Whole Language-phonics controversy, it's clear that the ability to make out words on a page is only the beginning of reading. Reading, in its fullest sense, is a model of how to understand the world and how to act in it. When Europe became literate in the Middle Ages, it began to conceive of nature as a book and science as the reading of this text. Ideas of conscience and a stable self, accessible to an inward gaze, were also modelled on the practice of reading. Literacy in this large metaphorical sense has shaped our entire civilization. We have taken the world as readers and writers of it. It's possible that this age, the age of what George Steiner calls 'bookish reading' is now ending as a new cybernetic age begins. Many recent writers have supposed that this is the case. Steiner predicts that the bookish will have to fall back on monastic houses of reading in order to practice an activity to which the new age is inhospitable. Ivan Illich imagines himself as the resident of an island of letters, now fast receding in an agitated sea of electronic signals. And Svend Berkhard, in his *The Reason They Can't Write a Sentence* is not because at this point they don't have the grammatical skills, because they're being overdosed with grammatical protocols now. The reason they can't write a sentence is because they don't live in time. It's a temporal problem. So I started pursuing this line of research. (Unclear) thinking about it,

'Gutenberg Elegies', a meditation on the fate of reading in an electronic age, goes so far as to suppose that we citizens of the post-literate age, I'm quoting, "are poised on the brink of what may prove to be a kind of species mutation".

If these writers are correct, then the question of reading now goes far beyond the issues touched on in the first half of tonight's program. We have to ask not just what is happening to the skill of reading in a limited technical sense but what is happening to the literate stance, to the literate self, to the literate sense of time. These are questions that Montreal poet David Solway has taken up in two recent books of essays, 'Education Lost' and 'Lying About the Wolf'. Solway teaches English at John Abbott College, a community college on the west island of Montreal and from his experiences he has drawn an honest and unflinching portrait of his students and the difficulties of teaching them. The overwhelming majority of these students, he says, cannot write continuous, coherent English prose, nor can they read in the patient, attentive attitude that would allow them to learn how to write. He called his recent book 'Lying About the Wolf' because he thinks that other teachers also know what he knows but fail to say so. For years, he says, his college has been providing incoming students with remedial courses in grammar and composition, but still their sentences remain jumbled and disorderly. He puzzled for a long time about why this should be and finally concluded that the problem was not really educational at all.

David Solway

essentially. What does it mean to say that a student doesn't live in time or that our students do not live in time? Because they obviously do. They have dates. They go to Saturday night parties, you know, and so obviously they have some sense of time. Well, that wasn't what I meant. Not time, but temporality. They didn't think in terms of either a historical

past or a personal past. I began to see that, in fact, temporality works along two parallel dimensions. It's historical and it's personal. There's a historical past that we should know about, whether it's a history of Canada--Granatstein argues that we don't know the history of Canada. And I've queried my students. I take class polls almost every semester and it's true. They don't know the history of Canada. They know almost nothing.

But they don't know the history of the world. Nor do they have much of a sense of a personal past. They cannot remember things that happened a year ago, six months ago. I received a phone call from a current student of mine just two or three days ago. She had written a paper for me on 'The Name of the Rose'. They had four or five topics. I asked them to choose one of these four or five topics on 'The Name of the Rose'. And she wanted to know how she did on the paper. So I asked her what her subject was on 'The Name of the Rose', which topic I asked her, did she write on. I was trying to place the paper 'cause I'd just finished grading over 140 of them. She couldn't remember. Same applies to the future, you know. They may have a general sense of dread, perhaps, about what's going to be happening in the future for them as Generation X, but they have no sense of how the future may develop politically, economically. They know that something happened in the Soviet Union around ... she says, do not struggle in time. They do not read. They do not think. They do not know how to study. They do not realize that time is ... is the nature of the struggle. They do not wish to struggle that way and the result is, since the brain grows only by virtue of struggle, that certain elements, certain parts of the brain have ceased to grow. You know, many of the dendritic area, as she calls them. And this is partly what is happening, she says, and it might be--and I use her words--that we are now experiencing, whether we know it or not, in our children and in our students, we are experiencing an actual species change. Now, this sounds a little bit exaggerated. There's

1988-1989, but they're not quite sure what. The degree of ignorance is overwhelming. Nor do they have much sense of a personal future. Not only because they are trapped in this sort of neo-liberal or neo-conservative--it amounts to the same thing--kind of apocalypse in which we are living, but because I don't think they can formulate projects for personal development. So you see, they don't have that future sense and they don't have that past sense but they live very much in a kind of present, which could either be an instantaneous moment or a slightly accordion kind of present which expands a little bit to include a few weeks on either end of the given moment. This is the major problem.

David Cayley

A sentence, a paragraph, an essay, for David Solway are projects in time. Subjects are suspended, modified and developed before arriving in time at their predicates. But the ability to inhabit and manipulate such temporal structures, he thinks, is now compromised for many youngsters. Time, for them, has lost its depth and duration as it has been stretched into a vast, shallow present. The thesis is alarming, but Solway finds support for it in a recent book by neurologist Jane Healey called 'Endangered Mind'.

David Solway

no question about it. But you have to read her book, you know. It's meticulously documented. She has years and years and years of research, study, application and this is her conclusion. Now whether it's true or not, again, I don't know. We'd have to examine a lot of brains to find that out, you know. But we can't do that. I think it's just another way of saying that if you don't live in time and you don't struggle and you don't develop patience, because patience is the human analog in the sense of temporal living, our students don't have patience. My students are not patient, you know. The 45 students I have per class are not patient people. They want to be

entertained. I have to tell them jokes in order to kick start a class. They want to get their paper done in one hour, if possible. And if they can't, they will buy the paper. They will also clone papers from the Internet. They'll do anything, you know, to avoid work, it seems to me. Work, patience, struggle, hospitality to time, a sense of feeling privileged and grateful that we can live in time because we have no other alternative. If we live in the moment, we simply do not develop. But this is, I think, the major problem of our times and this is why I've also argued in 'Lying About the Wolf', that no alteration in the structure of the educational paradigms is going to work either because the problem is not educational. The problem is cultural. And that's why, you know, reforms don't work.

David Cayley

Part of the problem of being stranded in the present, Solway thinks, is that it becomes difficult to cross over into the alternate reality of text. Reading is being in two places at once--the space the reader physically occupies and the hypothetical, imagined space of the text. The accomplished reader has a feel for the peculiar status of this imaginary space in which the hard and fast reality of the world can be altered and improved, abolished and restored. But Solway says that his students don't possess this feel. They can't get into it, as the saying is. Nor are they comfortable with the physical activity of reading, he says. They can't find the rhythm in it.

David Solway

They do not breathe with the text. They do not live in the text's temporality. They do not assimilate it into their bodies. There is no, from what I can see, there is no rhythmic apprehension. And I'm convinced that ... that good reading requires, you know, rhythm. You see this when you ask them to read out loud. This is the litmus test. Not just reading poetry out loud--we've always had trouble with that--but actually reading prose out loud. They do not know where to place the

intonations. They do not where the stress should fall. They stress the wrong words so that when they are actually reading the text in class, out loud, it sounds like the kind of thing you hear on, you know, in science fiction movies where you have computers reading texts sort of *sotto voce*, you know, in one flat level of intonation. There's no sense of joy or of delight in, you know, that is expressed when you read out loud by where you place the emphasis or by simply placing an emphasis sometimes in the first place. Their reading is either disemphatic or totally flat.

David Cayley

Reading, for Solway, is an experience of assimilation and incorporation. What he reads becomes a part of him as a defined self. His students, he thinks, have a more diffuse identity. Their existence is distributed in a variety of technological systems that can serve as extensions and stand-ins for the self.

David Solway

We can live in the moment because the vast technological armature that we have (unclear) around us enables us to access it at any moment and therefore enables us to use it as a substitute for developing our own sense of being in time. It is not necessary to think. It is not necessary to remember. It is not, you know, it is not necessary to reproduce anything that we have just learned. Everything is there, waiting for us. All we have to do is press the button. All we have to do is access the computer. All we have to do is take the book off the shelf. It's all out there, you see. None of us really believes that, but that is the current dogma, the distributable self. And that's, I think, one ... ties in with what I was saying earlier about the dilution of the time sense.

David Cayley

Much of what Solway is talking about evidently derives from the prevalence of screened and otherwise mediated reality in the lives of today's young people. He thinks that this new environment may have enhanced the visual,

pictorial sense to such a degree that pages now appear to be screens and words icons.

The papers I receive are often embellished with smiling faces, little emoticons. With arrows, right? Instead of developing an argument saying first, second, third, they will incorporate pointing fingers or wedges. It has become a visual phenomenon. It is an ... it is such an iconic presentation as if they resent having to write in sentences to begin with, you know. When I ask them to refer--I've written about this in my book--to a given paragraph or a given sentence in a paper that they have written or in something that they are presumably working on in class, they do not designate these objects numerically. They do not say the first sentence, the second sentence or "The author has written in the third paragraph that ..." They will represent or designate these textual objects iconically. They will say, "in the big paragraph the author said ...", by which they mean the third paragraph because that's the big one, you know. Or in the long sentence or in the short sentence rather than in the third sentence or the fourth sentence. I notice, for example, in my poetry classes that the poems they most love to deal with and find themselves most at home with are either haikus, single-image poems, or concrete poetry where you have the shape of the object or the subject of the poem actually designed into the poem itself so that it appears, as you know, as a picture on the page. But when it comes to the more complex forms, they have not only trouble reading the My success as a teacher--'cause I have success as a teacher. I have many failures, too. But my real success as a teacher comes when my student says to me after hours, I don't know how many hours, of discussion and grading and exchanges and so on, the student says, you know, you're right. You're right. I can't read and I can't think. And there are many reasons for this--parents, high schools, various reforms, budgetary cutbacks, the whole sort of televisual age in which we live. There are many reasons for this. And the

David Solway

poem, which they cannot do out loud. I force them to read out loud in class and it's very embarrassing. But they cannot follow the logical structure of a poem from one line to the next. But the minute I've got a haiku up here or an imageous poem or a concrete poem, tension evaporates. Then it's something they can deal with. For them, the page is ... it could be a screen but it could also be a ... a sheet of drawing paper. They look at things pictorially. They think visually. They isolate phenomena iconically--the big paragraph, the short sentence. This is what is happening. That kind of ability to transform or translate from one language into another or one dimension into another, from text into ... into imagination escapes them. This frightens me, actually.

David Cayley

David Solway is determined to tell the unvarnished truth about the difficulties that now stand in the way of education. But his honest witness to what goes on in his classroom should not be mistaken for disdain for his students. He's unusually devoted to his students, inviting to his home for what he calls his "living room classes" and following their progress after they leave the college.

David Solway

student will say help me and then I say to the student, if you ... and it (unclear) like a highly ... not even with a contract but the making of a covenant. If I say ... I say to the student, "If you will read these books over the next three years, then I will be here for you any time you want, you know, and we'll go over the material." The student in a way signs on. And I've had results. Not so long ago I got a call, ten o'clock at night, from a student of mine called Patrick Smeaton who was in my class of Herman Hesse twelve years ago. He called

me from a bar in Trois Rivières. He was high on something else than Labatt's Blue. He told me that he was a manager of a rock group now and they were touring through rural Quebec and they were now in Trois Rivières and he had just done their gig and they were now at a bar and they were all getting drunk and having a great time and the groupies were with them and so on. And he said, "Do you remember me, Patrick Smeaton?" 'Cause we had talked about, you know, him doing some reading afterwards and then somehow or other we lost contact. He didn't get in touch with me. I said, of course I remember Patrick Smeaton. I remember even the classroom that we were in. It was in the Poetry Building at John Abbott. He said I had to talk to you now because I have finally understood Hesse's journey to the east. He said it's taken me ten years or something like that, but I understood. He said, right now, here in this bar, I've understood what Hesse was saying in 'Journey to the East'. And now I want to read more of Hesse. And tell me what I should do and ... you know. So we had this nice talk late at night, you know. I could hear the sounds in the background of the bar, I mean, people singing, glasses smashing--whatever it happened to be. We had a talk on Herman Hesse and late German romanticism, in a way. And 'Journey to the East' and 'Magister Ludi', some of Hesse's poems. He hadn't known that Hesse was also a poet. And on the phone at that moment we developed a reading Authority, ardour, conviction and dignity. Let me say just a few words about each. By authority I don't mean authoritarianism. By authority I mean a knowledge of the subject which the teacher has acquired through years of effort. As a result of this, the emanation of a sense of confidence in the mastery of the field which the student always, 'cause they are very sensitive people, these students. When they are in the class, they can tell a fake from somebody who's genuine immediately. They know this. They're very good at this. And it is these teachers who have that confidence that comes from the mastery of the material

list for him, which he was now going to pursue as he was touring with his group because he ... and from Hesse I said he should go on to Thomas Mann. We talked about 'Doctor Faustus', which is a book I said, given what he was saying on the telephone, was something he might be very interested in. Going to be tough reading but, you know, and so on. He was scribbling all that stuff down. And Patrick is doing it. Now, that's what I call results.

David Cayley

David Solway has a high sense of the calling of the teacher. He believes that education should be about transformation and that what the teacher ideally is doing is not transferring data but initiating students into a wider world. This view has left him with a bitter sense of education's failure. Elite institutions continue to maintain their standards but in the middle ranks, where he works, he sees a failure of nerve. Literacy as the underpinning of critical self-consciousness, is fast eroding amongst the youngsters he teaches. But the political and moral will necessary to address this emergency is lacking. The lack shows, above all, in the low status of the teacher. Reflections on this low status and high calling make up David Solway's final remarks in tonight's program. As we talked in, his living room in Hudson, Quebec, I asked him what he thought were the attributes of a true teacher.

David Solway

that have no trouble disciplining a class or domesticating a class. There really is not a problem for them. Authority is essential in this sense. That kind of authority is always velvet gloved. You don't have to come across as somebody who wields some kind of weapon, whether that weapon is the grading pen or the letter of recommendation that you will present the student with afterwards for university or something like that. It's not that kind of authoritarianism. It's confidence that comes from mastery. Now, the problem today very much in the colleges and also in the high schools is that teachers, very many teachers,

too many teachers, do not have that inner light, that sense of inner authority because either they have not mastered their field or because, as so often happens in the high schools, they find themselves teaching courses which have nothing to do with their particular expertise or because they are administratively deprived of their authority. They are not meant to demonstrate it. They are supposed to be good communicators. It doesn't matter if you don't know anything or if you happen to be the gym teacher who's teaching history rather than gym or something like that. As long as you are a good communicator, whatever that means. What it means, of course, is that you can tell jokes and deal with students at their own level, mainly. And it doesn't matter what you have to say. Authority has been the victim of communication, if I can put it in that sort of aphoristic way. That's the first thing.

Ardour. The second principle comes with authority, of course. It comes as a facet of the irreducible personality itself. That is to say, the love that you feel for the discipline that you are teaching in and also for the culture at large, which I think has to precede the love you are supposed to feel for your student. We are all being taught, for example, that we have to love our students or we have to treat them as if we love them. We must not offend them. We must not fail them. In fact, there's a sign in my college, "There is no such thing as failure. There is only feedback." There is a such thing as failure. Failure is around us and within us all the time. We are all failures in something or other. Ardour means that you can live with your failures, that you love what you are doing, you love the language in which you speak. And the fourth is dignity, that you are respected for what you do, that there is a reciprocal relationship between you and your constituents, that you respect them for the effort that they are putting in to whatever it is that they are doing and that they respect you for your authority, for your ardour, and for your conviction. That respect has to be reciprocal and it has to be in place. What is happening

before you love your students. Of course there is feedback, but failure is all around us. But where we pass as teachers is in an overwhelming love that we feel for the discipline that we are teaching as an aspect of the larger culture or the civilized trajectory that we are moving along. This is the great boon and benefit and joy of not simply being a teacher, 'cause there are very few joys in that profession now, but of being human. And so I guess what I'm saying is that what I define as ardour in a teacher is simply one specific aspect or facet of being literately human.

The third principle is convincing. You have to believe in what you are doing. In the profession today, I have met very few teachers who believe any longer in what they are doing. They have lost conviction. And I can't blame teachers for this. Some teachers shouldn't be there in the first place, but this is true of anybody in any profession. But when you cease to believe that what you are doing is viable, when you cease to believe that it has any long-term value, when you cease to believe that it may have any pragmatic results that you can see--Patrick Smeaton telephoning you from a bar in Trois Rivieres or whatever it happens to be--when that conviction starts to go, then of course your ardour diminishes at the same time and so does your authority. 'Cause they are ... these elements or these principles as I've called them or these attributes or properties or what it is that makes a good teacher are all interconnected. They all imply one another constantly. Conviction is the third principle.

today is our teachers are losing self-respect because they are not receiving respect from the community around them and they begin to query themselves. Respect is shown, by the way, in some very tangible ways. It's not just a question of lip service. When your salary is constantly reduced so that you have to moonlight to make ends meet, you lose that sense of dignity. When you walk into a

classroom and you realize that one of your high middle class students--'cause I teach in a very wealthy community, comparatively wealthy, not so much as it used to be--when you see that a student is wearing on his back more than you could afford with a month's salary, when you park your, you know, 1984 Dodge Spirit in the parking lot next to the student's Camaro, students know this and they make it very clear. I've had students who've made it very clear when they walk in with their Gucci shoes and their leather jackets sometimes there is that sense, and you see it as an element in the very theatre of a classroom itself, where the audience, so to speak, derogates the actor, you know, where in fact the actors are merely clowns, we're performing for that audience. Salaries are being cut back and a good salary for a teacher is a tangible way of showing respect for what the teacher does. There are other ways, of course, in which a teacher is plundered or stripped or deprived of his or her dignity. The relation between administration and teaching in the current pedagogical world is another such example where the administrator no longer even pretends that he or she is a buffer between the teacher and, let's say, the Ministry or the Department of Education or something like that, but where the administrator becomes a delivery system or a conduit for that ministry or for that overweening Department of Education who actually colludes in the oppression of his teaching staff. When you realize that you're no ... a teacher is no longer responsible for the timetable, where the teacher no longer has an input in how the courses are going to be taught, when method is being opposed from above, or, I should say, methodology is being opposed from ... imposed from above, when classroom parameters are decided for you in advance, when you are simply there to execute what the bosses have told you to do, when you have become a secondary being, an auxiliary kind of creature, you are relentlessly pillaged of that sense of dignity, that sense that you stand for something that is not only accountable but that

you are in some sense or other a cultural perceptor.

This is one of the major dilemmas in the teaching profession today and explains the air of institutional sullenness that has pervaded the entire discipline. Teachers no longer have dignity. Teaching has become an impossible profession and what we have done is defraud the generation that we are supposed to teach and that we are supposed to care for. We are their custodians in the sense that we are custodians of the future. Our stewardship has been taken from us. That is what has happened.

Lister Sinclair

On Ideas tonight, you've heard Part 5 of The Education Debates, a series of programs by David Cayley. We'll continue next week with a program about how technology is transforming education.